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COMMAND, CONTROL, COMMUNICATION AND INTELLIGENCE  
IN THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT: WHO'S ON FIRST?

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views  
and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College  
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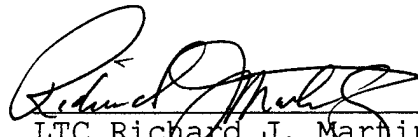
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Abstract of

COMMAND, CONTROL, COMMUNICATION AND INTELLIGENCE IN THE

MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT: WHO'S ON FIRST?

On 15 May 1975, U.S. military forces successfully recaptured the U.S. container ship *Mayaguez* and her crew from Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces. Considered a strategic success, the effort was hampered by numerous flaws at the operational level.

Because of the strategic implications of hostage rescue missions, it is imperative that the application of operational art be done in the most thorough manner possible. This paper will examine some of the failures of the *Mayaguez* incident at the operational level with specific focus on the operational functions of command, control, communication and intelligence. Lessons learned will be determined and checked for applicability today in the hope of preventing the shortfalls identified in *Mayaguez* from occurring in the future.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Mayaguez* incident that occurred in May 1975 was an unusual instance of strategic success despite numerous failures at the operational level. President Ford's goal, the release of the U.S. container ship *S.S. Mayaguez* and her crew from custody of Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces was achieved. The decision to use military force was based predominantly on two factors: 1) the low regard for the United States on the international scene, particularly in Asia in the shadow of the debacle in Vietnam and the subsequent evacuation of Saigon completed only two weeks prior, and 2) a compelling desire to avoid a situation similar to the *Pueblo* incident, in which the ship was moved to the North Korean mainland, seriously reducing the possibility of a rescue. Ford felt "that following its withdrawal from Vietnam the United States needed to signal its continuing determination to protect its interests in Asia . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite a legitimate claim to success at the strategic level, there were several flaws at the operational level that could have resulted in a different outcome, much to the detriment of U.S. strategic interests. Further, the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Lamb, Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis, (Gainesville, Fl.: University of Florida Press, 1989), 15.

fifteen American servicemen is not something that is lauded after an examination of the incident.\* The application of operational art is essential to providing the best likelihood of success and the best possible outcome of events in achieving that success in such high stakes ventures as hostage rescue missions. An analysis of the operational functions of command, control, communication and intelligence (C3I) conducted off the Cambodian coast and a check of lessons learned for applicability today will be beneficial to all who serve at the operational level.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

On 12 May 1975, Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces seized the *S.S. Mayaguez*, an American container vessel, in international waters approximately sixty miles southwest of the Cambodian mainland. Prior to being boarded, the crew managed to send a distress signal that was heard by the Delta Exploration Company radio watch in Jakarta, Indonesia; this information was relayed to the American Embassy, Jakarta that notified

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\* Fifteen dead were the result of direct enemy engagement. All twenty three personnel aboard a helicopter were killed thirty seven miles west of Nakhon Phanom, Thailand while en route to Utapao during the initial staging of personnel assigned to the rescue attempt.

Washington of the incident by message. *Mayaguez* was escorted to a position just north of Poulo Wai, an island seven miles north of where the seizure took place, and anchored overnight. Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had ordered a reconnaissance aircraft launched to locate the *Mayaguez* and her crew. A Navy P-3 located the *Mayaguez* at its position off Poulo Wai on 13 May. Even as this information was being passed, *Mayaguez* was again underway, this time for Koh Tang (Koh is the Cambodian word for island), about thirty miles northeast of Poulo Wai and an equal distance from the Cambodian mainland. However, due to the direction of travel it was believed that the destination was Kompong Som on the mainland. The ship anchored one mile north of the island where it remained until retaken by U.S. Marines on 15 May. The exact whereabouts of the crew was uncertain. Several small boats were observed moving to the *Mayaguez* and between the ship and Koh Tang. It was, therefore, concluded that at least some of the crew had been moved to Koh Tang.

Just hours after the seizure, the first of four National Security Council meetings was convened. President Ford ordered diplomatic avenues be explored along with contingency plans for a military option. Minutes later, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) was directed to move all available Air Force helicopters and a detachment of Security Police to

Utapao and to bring two reinforced Marine platoons from Cubi Point, Philippines and one Marine battalion from Okinawa to Utapao, Thailand. These deployments were completed within fifteen hours of the order (1400 Gulf of Thailand time).

When diplomatic efforts did not proceed as preferred, execution of the contingency plan was ordered. This plan involved a Marine assault via helicopter insertion on Koh Tang to secure the island (approximately three miles long and an average one mile wide) and search for the *Mayaguez* crew. Two landing sites were chosen on the east and west side of the island on the only two beaches deemed acceptable for the insertion. The beaches were five hundred yards apart at a narrow neck on the northern end of the island. A second group of Marines was to be delivered to the USS *Holt*, a destroyer escort, and then board and retake the *Mayaguez*.

The first wave of the assault force, embarked in eight helicopters, encountered fierce resistance from the outset. The result, one hour after the assault began, was only fifty four Americans were on the island, fourteen dead, three of five helicopters were shot down, the fourth forced down on the Thai mainland and the fifth severely damaged. The next three helicopters made attempts on the western beach. Two successfully delivered their Marines, although one had to make

the delivery 500-1000 meters south of the beach due to heavy fire and the other suffered extensive damage. The third was unable to make the delivery. The net outcome of the first assault wave was 109 Marines and five USAF personnel on the island: sixty on the western beach, twenty on the eastern beach (with the five airmen) and twenty-nine, including the commander of the ground troops, south of the western beach.

About one hour after the assault on Koh Tang began, the U.S.S. *Holt* drew along side the *Mayaguez* and the Marine boarding party found her empty. A little over two hours after that, U.S.S. *Wilson* intercepted a Thai fishing boat approaching Koh Tang and discovered the crew of the *Mayaguez* on board. When word reached Washington that the crew had been recovered, a halt to offensive operations was ordered. The Marines on Koh Tang were still in a precarious position: outnumbered and taking heavy fire. The two groups on the western side were able to link up minutes before the arrival of the second assault wave. The Marines assigned to the second assault wave were en route to Koh Tang when the order to halt offensive operations was received. It was decided that they would be inserted on the island to allow for a safe disengagement and extraction from the island, but this was not without confusion and delay in their arrival since they were initially ordered to return to base and headed back to Utapao.



When it became clear that the battalion commander was insistent upon the second wave being landed, the helicopters were ordered to reverse course once more and head for Koh Tang.<sup>2</sup>

The extraction, which took two hours and was conducted almost entirely after dark (only the eastern beach extraction was completed in daylight hours), resulted in major damage to three more helicopters.

#### **ANALYSIS**

A closer look at the facts reveals a failure of command, control, communication and intelligence across the board. Regarding command and control, the structure that was set up was lacking in a number of areas. The first direction given in response to the incident was via phone from the National Military Command Center (NMCC) to Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) ordering the launch of a reconnaissance aircraft. This Navy P-3 would remain under CINCPAC's operational command for the duration of the mission. There was no message transmitted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) or CINCPAC that specifically assigned responsibility

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<sup>2</sup> J.M. Johnson and others, "Individual Heroism Overcame Awkward Command Relationships, Confusion and Bad Information off the Cambodian Coast." Marine Corps Gazette, October 1977, 32.

for the mission.<sup>3</sup> This would have a cascading affect on all future efforts until the extraction of the Marines from Koh Tang was complete. The following is a description of the forces assembled for the mission:

1) Thirteen USAF CH-53 and HH-53 helicopters under Lieutenant General Burns, U.S. Support Activities Group/7<sup>th</sup> Air Force (USSAG/7AF) were deployed to Utapao, Thailand, the staging site located 190 miles from Koh Tang. General Burns was to be the on scene commander and the central coordinating authority for the recovery operations.<sup>4</sup> This description amounts to what today is the Joint Task Force Commander, although he never formally received operational control of all the joint forces. Navy and Marine units were directed by senior Navy and Marine commands to respond to the directives and tasking of COMUSSAG/7AF and to conduct contingency operations as directed by CINCPAC and COMUSSAG/7AF.<sup>5</sup> Control by COMUSSAG was implied, but not explicitly spelled out.

2) Marines composed the ground assault force. A total of 1120 men from 2d Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines (BLT 2/9) and Rifle Company D (reinforced) was airlifted to Utapao on 14 May. Colonel John

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<sup>3</sup> Urey W. Patrick, The Mayaguez Operation, (Arlington, Virginia: Center for Naval Analysis), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 26; and Patrick, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick, 8.

Johnson was the commander of this force. Colonel Johnson intended to participate in the assault in Koh Tang, but a lack of available helicopters resulted in the assault being planned in waves. Colonel Johnson opted to remain at Utapao with his staff until a later wave in the assault. An airborne mission commander (AMC) in an airborne command and control center (ABCCC) was designated as the focal point for all on-scene activities for the duration of the mission. Although Colonel Johnson remained behind during the first wave of the assault, there was no Marine/ground force representation on the ABCCC. He had essentially placed the ground assault force under the operational control of the AMC.

3) Navy assets assigned to support the mission were U.S.S. *Holt*, U.S.S. *Wilson*, and U.S.S. *Coral Sea*. None were under operational control (OPCON) of the ABCCC (USSAG). In fact, all three remained OPCON to CINCPAC; *Holt* and *Wilson* were in contact with the ABCCC but were never tasked; *Coral Sea* was also in contact with the ABCCC and did provide operational fires against mainland targets. Yet, all three ships were supporting the mission at the direction of CINCPAC.

Thus, the arrangement on 15 May as the assault was about to begin had the Navy ships participating but not under the operational control of the on scene commander ("JTF"); the

overall Marine commander (who participated in the planning but did not go on the first assault wave) expecting to be able to communicate with the assault force through a link with the ABCCC; and the ABCCC with no Marine representation. A description of the geographic layout provides some further insight. LGEN Burns, as COMUSSAG/7AF ("JTF"), is located in Nakhon Phanom, 360 miles from Utapao, 530 miles from Coral Sea's position, and nearly 500 miles from Koh Tang. The distances were such that the ABCCC had to orbit 90 miles north of Koh Tang to maintain the required communications link with COMUSSAG/7AF. This arrangement placed the ABCCC out of sight of the assault it was supposed to coordinate. This is anything but a text book model of unity of command.

It is painfully obvious that the wheels are primed to fall off this communications wagon and make this mission more even difficult than it was to already going to be. However, the intelligence aspect will be addressed first since it will provide an obvious lead in to the communications problems.

"USSAG, responsible for disseminating available intelligence, had no designated intelligence officer, and it failed to ensure that subordinate commands were apprised of the latest intelligence."<sup>6</sup> There were several sources of

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<sup>6</sup> Lamb, 132.

information regarding suspected enemy troop strengths on Koh Tang. One, a former Cambodian naval officer who "allegedly had recently been on Koh Tang . . . said that there would probably be no more than twenty to thirty people on the island and that the BLT could expect to find no organized regular units to contest their landing."<sup>7</sup> In their appraisal of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the Joint Chiefs of Staff provided a small, but significant piece of information that might have proven useful. Koh Tang was among several islands disputed by the Vietnamese and Cambodians based on possible oil deposits on the continental shelf. The Cambodians apparently garrisoned these islands before the Vietnamese made a bigger issue of the matter. As a result, DIA estimates were 150-200 Khmer Communists with a number of heavy weapons on the island.<sup>8</sup> This information was known before the mission was executed and proved to be deadly accurate. Commander, Pacific Intelligence (COMIPAC) had a smaller estimate at 90-100 Cambodian troops. COMUSSAG/7AF had the COMIPAC estimates, but for unexplained reasons neither estimate was passed to the assault forces at Utapao. They entered the fray anticipating minimal opposition. The sad commentary on this is information

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson and others, 27.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, After Action Report US Military Operations SS Mayaguez/Kaoh Tang Island 12-15 May 1975, Tab B.

was available but not utilized do to a communication problem.

The biggest uncertainty in the intelligence realm was the exact location of the *Mayaguez* crew. Part of the confusion lay in the fact that two fishing boats were used to take the crew from the *Mayaguez* to Koh Tang and only one was used to move them to Kompong Som on the mainland, and subsequently to Koh Rong Sam Lem before their release. Several boats were observed leaving Koh Tang for the mainland. One proved extremely persistent and, despite repeated warning shots and tear gas attacks from U.S. tactical aircraft, was able to make the mainland. There were reports that pilots saw a number of Caucasians on the boat, but not the forty who would account for the entire crew. What was unknown to the pilots was that the crew consisted of Filipinos and Americans of black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican descent. This knowledge may have brought decision makers to the conclusion that the entire crew was on the mainland, precluding the assault on Koh Tang, but this is not likely. The assumption was that at least some of the crew remained on Koh Tang. This was truly unfortunate and proved to be a double-edged sword. Not only would Koh Tang be assaulted (unnecessarily) under unexpected heavy fire but, in deference to the safety of the crew, no pre-assault strikes on the island occurred.

The utter lack of communication flow nearly resulted in the failure of the mission. Prior to further commentary, it should be pointed out that at the operational and strategic level, communication capabilities existed that were both over- and under utilized, the former likely causing the latter.

Perversely, the very excellence of electronic communications and the abundance of channels tying higher echelons of command together had become a major source of operational uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

The leaders in Washington were listening and talking on the one frequency on which the ABCCC and ground forces were communicating. As a result, the frequency was flooded with transmissions that interfered with the execution of the mission. This is evidenced by the failure to establish the planned critical radio link between the ground forces and their commander via the ABCCC.

Colonel Johnson remained in Utapao anticipating a communication link with the ABCCC until the helicopters returned from inserting the first wave of Marines, at which time he and the remainder of the planned assault force would depart for Koh Tang. What he did not anticipate was that the communications link would not be established. As a result,

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Guilmartin, Jr., A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1995), 108.

while he could talk to General Burns in Nakhon Phanom (360 miles in the opposite direction of hostilities) he was removed from the chain of command and decision making process. Unfolding events would ensure he remained so for the duration of the mission.

The unanticipated heavy resistance encountered by the first wave left only five helicopters available for the second wave with only 109 of the 185 Marines planned for actually ashore. Colonel Johnson, receiving reports from the returning helicopter crews, was able to get a sense of the precarious situation of the Marines on Koh Tang. The lack of Marine representation in the ABCCC almost proved disastrous at this juncture, for it is while the separated units on the western shore are trying to join up and the second wave is en route that the *Wilson* recovers the crew of the *Mayaguez*. Shortly after, the second wave, now vitally needed on the island to help stabilize the situation and allow a safe extraction, is turned around. Colonel Austin, on Koh Tang and in charge of the assault force, was talking to the ABCCC but was nonetheless "operating alone. No one with whom he was in contact outside his perimeter was conversant with the fundamentals of infantry combat or Marine Corps ground doctrine, let alone the tactical specifics of his



predicament."<sup>10</sup> Likely, Colonel Austin's insistence on the need for the second wave and Colonel Johnson's reaction to hearing it was turned around prevented a tactical disaster that would have been averted had there been Marine representation on the ABCCC.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Command, control, communication and intelligence are not new concepts. The ability to manage all of them effectively is always a potentially elusive task in combat situations and, if not done, difficult to overcome once the fighting starts. The lack of a specified command structure in the *Mayaguez* incident left some of the participants wondering exactly what to do and who to answer to when they arrived on scene. This was especially the case for the naval units. It also caused COMUSSAG/7AF to assume that, as the "JTF Commander," he had operational control over units that may not have been responsive because of their uncertainty of which master to serve. In this case, without command, there was no control. Adherence to current joint doctrine would have addressed this shortcoming by delineating the chain of command in the "Command Relationships" paragraph of the operation order.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 117.

As for communication, it is hard for anyone to imagine that a U.S. military commander could end up in the predicament that Colonel Johnson found himself in. The abundance of communication equipment available today, as witnessed in Operation Desert Storm, tends to alleviate concerns that this could ever happen again. At a minimum, General Johnson, as the ground component commander, should have ensured a Marine went up on the ABCCC. As a result of a communication block, he never had control of the units so critical to this mission.

"Obtaining and synthesizing intelligence prior to beginning operations is a vital task."<sup>11</sup> In this case, it appears no one asked for a second opinion. DIA would have given a much more sober diagnosis. The problem today is not likely to be a lack of intelligence information, as occurred in the *Mayaguez* incident, but having a so much information that it becomes problematic trying to synthesize it all. There are things we can do to help ourselves in this effort. In an age of Internet capability and with the advent of re-writable CDs, information on every area of the globe is available and can be used to update official intelligence estimates. However, the best intelligence, human intelligence, will continue to be the

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<sup>11</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Intelligence Support to Operations (Joint Pub 2-0) (Washington D.C.: 5 May 1995), III-1.

most difficult to acquire and should never be substituted for high tech capabilities whenever it exists.

Does any of this really apply today? One lesson that should be retained from the loss in Somalia of eighteen U.S. Army personnel in a raid gone bad in October 1993, as it relates to *Mayaguez*, is that

small scale operations against numerous and well-armed enemies far from friendly bases are apt to remain a staple of U.S. campaigns for the foreseeable future.<sup>12</sup>

The reduction in U.S. forces stationed overseas, increases in the number of crises occurring in widely separated geographic areas, the need for faster and more precise warning systems . . . have all helped to focus more critically the need for a truly outstanding C3 capability.<sup>13</sup>

These words were not spoken in 1998, but in 1978. Twenty years later their applicability remains right on the mark.

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<sup>12</sup> Guilmartin, 161.

<sup>13</sup> Head, 85-86.

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